WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A communications system for transferring electronic data between users, the system including a host system structured and arranged to receive and deliver messages of various types between users of the communications system, the host system comprising:

an instant messaging network enabling instant messaging communication between users of the communications system, the instant messaging network having the capability to monitor whether a certain user is capable of receiving an instant message at a particular moment;

a mail gateway receiving and delivering e-mail messages to users of the communications system; and

a configuring network in communication with both the instant messaging network and the mail gateway, the configuring network being dedicated to automatically configure instant messaging communication between an intended recipient of an e-mail message and the sender of the e-mail message.

2. The communications system of claim 1 wherein the configuring network comprises a look-up server for associating e-mail addresses with instant messaging screen names.

3. The communications system of claim 1 wherein the configuring network sends a redirection command to the recipient based on the capability of the sender to receive an instant message.

4. The communications system of claim 3 wherein the redirection command comprises a uniform resource locator.

5. The communications system of claim 1 wherein the configuring network sends a redirection command to the recipient based on the capability of another recipient of the e-mail message to receive an instant message.

6. The communications system of claim 5 wherein the redirection command comprises a uniform resource locator.

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1   7. The communications system of claim 1 wherein the configuring network

2 establishes a persistent connection to the instant messaging network.

1   8. The communications system of claim 1 wherein the configuring network checks a

2 control port to confirm whether the sender is capable of receiving an instant message.

1   9. The communications system of claim 1 wherein the configuring network

2 determines whether an e-mail address is associated with a recognized domain.

1   10. The communications system of claim 9 wherein the configuring network strips

2 recognized domains from e-mail addresses.

1   11. The communications system of claim 1 wherein the configuring network

2 comprises a cache.

1   12 The communications system of claim 11 wherein the configuring network detects

2 whether information associated with an e-mail message is stored in the cache.

1   13. The communications system of claim 1 wherein the mail gateway comprises a

2 send mail server for delivering electronic data to users.

1   14. The communications system of claim 1 wherein the mail gateway comprises a

2 read mail server for accessing electronic data.

1   15. The communications system of claim 1 wherein the mail gateway comprises a

2 processing server for processing electronic data.

1   16. The communications system of claim 1, wherein the mail gateway is web-based.

1   17. The communications system of claim 1 wherein the mail gateway is online-

2 service-provider-based.

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1   18. The communications system of claim 1 wherein the mail gateway is instant-

2   messaging-host-based.

1   19. The communications system of claim 1, wherein the instant messaging network is

2   web-based.

1   20. The communications system of claim 1, wherein the instant messaging network

2   is online-service-provider-based.

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2   21. A communications method for transferring electronic data between users of a

3   communications system, the communications system including a host that is structured and

4   arranged to receive and deliver messages of various types between users of the

5   communications system, the method comprising:

6   enabling instant messaging communication between users of the communications

7   system at an instant messaging network, the instant messaging network having the capability

8   to monitor whether a certain user is capable of receiving an instant message at a particular

9   moment;

10   receiving e-mail messages at a mail gateway;

11   delivering the e-mail messages to users of the communications system; and

12   automatically configuring instant messaging communication between an intended

13   recipient of an e-mail message and the sender of the e-mail message at a configuring

14   network, the configuring network being in communication with both the instant messaging

15   network and the mail gateway.

1   22. The communications method of claim 21 further comprising associating e-mail

2   addresses with instant messaging screen names at a look-up server.

1   23. The communications method of claim 21 further comprising sending a

2   redirection command from the configuring network to the recipient based on the capability of

3   the sender to receive an instant message.

1   24. The communications method of claim 21 further comprising sending a
2   redirection command from the configuring network to the recipient based on the capability of
3   another recipient of the e-mail message to receive an instant message.

1   25. The communications method of claim 21 further comprising establishing a
2   persistent connection between the configuring network and the instant messaging network.

1   26. The communications method of claim 21 further comprising checking a control
2   port to confirm whether the sender is capable of receiving an instant message.

1   27. The communications method of claim 21 further comprising determining whether
2   an e-mail address is associated with a recognized domain.

1   28. The communications method of claim 27 further comprising stripping a
2   recognized domain from the e-mail address.

1   29. The communications method of claim 21 further comprising determining whether
2   information associated with an e-mail message is stored locally.

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2   30. A computer program for transferring electronic data between users of a
3   communications system, the communications system including a host that is structured and
4   arranged to receive and deliver messages of various types between users of the
5   communications system, the computer program being stored on a computer readable medium
6   and comprising instructions for:
7   enable instant messaging communication between users of the communications
8   system at an instant messaging network, the instant messaging network having the capability
9   to monitor whether a certain user is capable of receiving an instant message at a particular
10   moment;
11   receive e-mail messages at a mail gateway;
12   deliver the e-mail messages to users of the communications system; and
13   automatically configure instant messaging communication between an intended

14   recipient of an e-mail message and the sender of the e-mail message at a configuring

15   network, the configuring network being in communication with both the instant messaging

16   network and the mail gateway.

1   31.   The computer program of claim 30 wherein the computer readable medium

2   comprises a disc.

1   32.   The computer program of claim 30 wherein the computer readable medium

2   comprises a propagated signal.

1   33.   The computer program of claim 30 wherein the computer readable medium

2   comprises a host.

1   34.   The computer program of claim 30 wherein the computer readable medium

2   comprises a client.